INFLUENCE

Bad, Wrong, or Stupid:
How Not to Influence

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THE INFLUENCE GURU

Labeling the other person bad, wrong, or stupid is the least likely way to change a mind. Curiosity works better.

"How can you believe a thing like that?" "That's completely irrational." "You've joined the lunatic fringe, I see." "If everyone thought/dressed/acted/voted that way, we'd be in big trouble."

How many times in the past few months have we wanted to say something like that to a friend, a relative, or a colleague? Whether the topic is politics, business, fashion, or even the choice of which sports team to support, it's difficult to imagine that a person we work with, like, or are related to can possibly see the world so differently from the way we do. Family ties, friendships, and working relationships can be strained or even broken by the way we react to one another's opinions and actions. A lot has been written recently about how "tribal" we have become: living in a bubble or an echo chamber, watching, listening to and reading the media that aligns with and reinforces our own opinion. We try to avoid difficult conversations – which may mean avoiding speaking with people with whom we assume we will disagree.

In this new world of "alternative facts," people on each side of a dispute or difference feel entitled to their own truth. More than ever before, taking it for granted that we start with a common data set with another can lead to confusion and miscommunication. It also can lead to escalation; moving rapidly from discussion to argument to personal conflict, featuring an attack-defend spiral. Once this process begins, it becomes difficult, even impossible, to influence one another.

The more we spend time with like-minded others, staying within our comfort zone, the less conflict we experience, the more supported we feel, and the less likely we are to question ourselves, to learn anything or to change anyone's mind.

In our Constructive Debate seminar, we begin by asking participants to consider how they and others reach conclusions. We distinguish among three types of statements or self-talk: facts, values, and assumptions.

> THREE KINDS OF STATEMENTS
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> - Facts are data that can be objectively observed
> - Values are beliefs about what is right, wrong, good, or bad

> - Assumptions are the inferences we make and the meaning we then assign to the data we have selected to pay attention to, often informed by our values.

In the past, most disagreements have been based on values or assumptions. In this new and more complex environment, we also fight about the facts.

Many disagreements are played out through mutual attempts at persuasion, but since the parties often don't share a common set of facts, these conversations go nowhere – or quickly downhill. Ad hominem arguments prevail. ("You're just so stupid/prejudiced/uninformed/manipulated/selfish that you can't see the truth staring you in the face!") It's a natural response to what seems like an inability on the part of the other to face what you believe to be reality.

So…how well does that work for you? As brain scientists and behavioral economists have demonstrated, the least likely strategy for getting someone to agree with you is to put them on the defensive, to make them feel attacked and labeled bad, wrong, or stupid. Once the wall of defense goes up, we tend to become more and more firmly fixed behind it, stuck in our own position, unable to consider other possibilities while we feel under threat.

So how can you influence someone who has a different set of facts, values, or assumptions from yours? The ancient Greek philosopher, Epictetus, is credited with the quote, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." That's good advice, but difficult to follow when your emotions are threatening to overcome your rationality.

More effective self-talk can save these situations from spinning out of control. Instead of focusing on how wrong the other person is, you can turn on your curiosity. Rather than telling yourself, "What an idiot. Why should I waste my time on him/her/them?" You might try, "Hmmm. That's really interesting. I wonder how this person reached that conclusion, so different from mine." You can then ask, with real interest – not just fishing for statements that you can then destroy with your superior logic – questions that might help you understand the other. You can withhold judgment for long enough to reduce suspicion. You don't have to agree, but you can begin to remove a few bricks from the walls each of you has built. Over time, if you demonstrate interest, listen non-judgmentally, and begin to identify areas of common ground, you create an atmosphere in which mutual influence can take place. (And remember, influence is a two-way process!)

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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